Independent Observer
Volume II: Political Manipulation and Empire
September 03, 2025

The American Empire Was Never a Democracy

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Abstract

This working paper argues that the United States has historically operated less as a participatory democracy than as a managed republic in which elite interests exercise outsized influence over political, economic, and informational institutions. From the constitutional design—explicitly concerned with protecting the **"minority of the opulent"**—to contemporary mechanisms of social control, money in politics, militarized foreign policy, and concentrated media ownership, patterns of power persist. Synthesizing scholarship and official data, the paper traces continuities from slavery and the Three-Fifths Compromise to mass incarceration and felony disenfranchisement; from Gilded Age industrial capitalism to modern wealth concentration and extreme CEO-to-worker pay gaps; and from Cold War covert action to an extensive global base network and post-9/11 war casualties. The analysis concludes with reforms compatible with a more democratic political economy, including universal social rights, robust voting and representation reforms, workplace democracy, anti-monopoly enforcement, campaign finance reform, and a diplomacy-first grand strategy.

Keywords: **U.S. politics; democracy; oligarchy; voter suppression; mass incarceration; political economy; media; U.S. foreign policy**

JEL Classification: D72; D63; H11; K14; N41; F51

Acknowledgments

Prepared for The Independent Observer working paper series on political economy and governance.

Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

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1. Introduction

The United States is often celebrated as history's leading democracy, but its design and practice suggest a managed republic oriented toward elite control rather than popular sovereignty. Scholars from various disciplines, including political linguistics, history, law, and economics, have documented this structural bias. James Madison, reporting on the Constitutional Convention, wrote that government should be arranged to "protect the minority of the opulent against the majority." This paper synthesizes evidence across periods and institutions to argue that the U.S. has consistently limited the scope of majority rule while amplifying the power of property, capital, and imperial strategy. It also outlines feasible reforms to align governance with democratic ends.

2. Founding Architecture: Elite Control and Slavery

The framers were not a cross-section of ordinary citizens; they were merchants, lawyers, planters, and slaveholders. Madison's own convention notes prioritize safeguarding property from majoritarian pressures. The Constitution's Three-Fifths Compromise augmented slaveholding states' clout in the House and Electoral College, entrenching a political order built upon human bondage. As Edmund S. Morgan observed, American freedom was historically intertwined with the Institution of slavery in America. That contradiction persisted long after ratification.

3. From Emancipation to Mass Incarceration

Although the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, it preserved an exception "as a punishment for crime," facilitating convict leasing and penal servitude. In the modern era, mass incarceration has become a defining feature of social control: nearly two million people are behind bars in the United States at any given time, with disproportionate impact on Black and brown communities. Supervision (probation and parole) extends the carceral footprint further, bringing total correctional control to well over five million adults in recent years.

4. Voting Rights, Gerrymandering, and Disenfranchisement

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Formal barriers to voting have fallen, yet structural suppression persists. The Supreme Court's decision in Shelby County v. Holder (2013) weakened key preclearance protections of the Voting Rights Act, paving the way for a wave of restrictive laws. Partisan gerrymandering dilutes votes and skews representation; felony disenfranchisement continues to silence large numbers of citizens. In Florida, for example, voting-eligible Black adults face disenfranchisement rates exceeding 12%—more than double non-Black rates—due to the interplay of felony convictions and financial barriers to rights restoration even after voters approved reform in 2018.

5. Political Economy: From the Gilded Age to the Present

During the Gilded Age, industrial titans consolidated power as strikes were met with injunctions and, at times, federal troops, as in the 1894 Pullman Strike. Today's economy again exhibits extreme concentration: the top decile now holds around 60% of wealth, and the top 1% roughly 31%, according to Federal Reserve estimates, while the bottom half holds only a few percent. CEO-to-typical-worker pay ratios remain extraordinarily high—around 290:1 in 2023 by one rigorous estimate and over 600:1 among the lowest-paying large firms. Surveys find that roughly 60% of Americans report living paycheck to paycheck, underscoring household precarity amid aggregate prosperity.

6. Money in Politics and "Inverted Totalitarianism"

Campaign finance patterns reveal industries hedging by funding both parties; financial, energy, and defense interests figure prominently. Political theorist Sheldon Wolin described the resulting order as "managed democracy" or "inverted totalitarianism," where corporate power shapes public institutions and civic life becomes thinly participatory. Regardless of terminology, the outcome is policy inertia on broadly popular issues and a persistent bias toward capital-friendly outcomes.

7. Empire and Realpolitik Abroad

The United States maintains an unmatched overseas base network, with around 750 sites in roughly 80 countries, supporting global power projection. Post-war covert actions included well-documented roles in overthrowing democratic governments in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), and Chile (1973). The conflicts after 9/11 have resulted in huge human costs: the Costs of War project estimates over 940,000 direct deaths across Iraq, Afghanistan, and associated regions, with many more indirect deaths. These facts are often presented in moral terms but mainly serve resource access and geostrategic dominance.

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8. Dissent, Surveillance, and Internal Security

Domestically, state power has targeted dissent—from COINTELPRO's operations against civil rights, anti-war, and Black freedom movements (including the killing of Fred Hampton during a 1969 police raid facilitated by an FBI informant), to 21st-century mass surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden. The message is consistent: exposures of wrongdoing face punishment, while state and corporate abuses frequently escape accountability.

9. Media Concentration and Historical Narratives

News and entertainment are dominated by a small number of conglomerates, narrowing the range of mainstream discourse. The "propaganda model" articulated by Herman and Chomsky remains a helpful framework for analyzing how media incentives shape the flow of information. In education, sanitized narratives often minimize the centrality of slavery, settler colonialism, and social movements; James Loewen's work documents the gap between textbook myth and historical complexity. A public shielded from complexity is easier to steer with slogans than with facts.

10. Toward a More Democratic Political Economy

A true democracy aligns formal rights with material resources and meaningful participation. Key elements include: (1) universal social rights to healthcare, housing, and education; (2) voting and representation reforms such as automatic voter registration, strong rights restoration, independent redistricting, proportional representation, and public financing; (3) workplace democracy with robust unions and cooperative ownership; (4) strict anti-monopoly enforcement and reform of campaign finance; and (5) a diplomacy-focused foreign policy with transparent oversight of military bases and operations. These measures help close the gap between popular sovereignty and elite dominance.

11. Conclusion

If capital continues to dominate governance, prisons replace social policy, and hegemony supplants diplomacy, democratic life will remain aspirational. The first step is clarity about design and practice; the next is institutional imagination to create something

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better—an accountable republic capable of majority rule with minority rights, economic security, and a foreign policy grounded in restraint and the rule of law.

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